Rebuilding after a crisis

Dennis Sleigh

When disaster strikes

It takes a long time to build a reputation, and a few minutes to destroy it. As teachers and parents, we have seen examples of this and we may have wept at the damage that can be done in such a short time to a person who has worked hard to establish integrity. One drink too many, a burst of speed on a busy road, an angry response to on-going harassment – all can cause major, long-term damage.

Of course, such damage is not limited to individuals. Think of the cost to the name of George W Bush following his response to Cyclone Katrina, or the damage to Tiger Woods as a sporting hero when news spread about his marital infidelities or the loss to Murdoch's media empire caused by the on-going phone-hacking exercise.

Schools are also subject to these sudden misfortunes. A prestigious school can suddenly become far less desirable if its high-profile students do the wrong thing – as we have seen on several occasions in recent years. The actions of a few can destroy, or at least damage, the efforts of thousands. The real challenge arises when we try to repair this damage.

Dealing with a threat to a school's reputation requires us to think in three tenses: past, present and future. We must be able to point to a past where things were much better, and remind people that our previously high reputation was the result of years and years of work, work that must not be ignored in the light of the current disaster. We must also remind people that while we deeply regret the incident that is now attracting such negative attention, we are also grateful that our present school community still has many redeeming features that will act as a basis for renewed growth. Finally, we must speak confidently of a future in which we will learn from today's lessons and avoid further tragedies. A school exists for a long time, and our thinking about that school must not be allowed to be unduly coloured by an unfortunate event here and now.

Looking for answers

Before looking at restoring the reputation, when we are faced with damage to our school's good name we must first ask what caused it.

In simple terms, the damage can be done by the negative behaviour of an individual or group, or it can be brought about because of the failure of the traditional culture to impact

on the current stakeholders. If a student's foolish actions bring the school into disrepute, this could well be serious but perhaps not as difficult to respond to, as would be the case if the entire student body (or the staff or the parents) gradually dismiss as irrelevant the high standards that have earned the school its reputation.

The traditional Christian prayer to the Trinity, which ends with the words "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be" definitely does not apply to a school's reputation. What was once a glorious and enviable reputation can quickly be dragged through the mud if the decline sets in, either due to the actions of a fraction of the school body or because of a general malaise affecting everyone. Responses to these disparate causes will differ and therefore we need to explore the *underlying cause* of any attack on a school's reputation.

When the French priest, Mgr Joseph Cardijn established the Jocist Movement (known in Australia as YCW), he asked his followers to use a three stage process to explore a problem: see, judge and act. More recent organisational theorists have come up with more complex ways of saying the same thing, but the fundamental wisdom remains the same: look carefully at the evidence, evaluate it carefully and then – and only then – take steps to change the situation. This wise advice applies when we move into damage control after our reputations have been damaged. Each of the steps has value, but their real worth becomes apparent only when all three are used together. Let's reflect briefly on each one.

Look at the evidence

If a school gains notoriety because a student inadvertently does something silly, this is different to the damage done when a person deliberately does something wrong. Imagine the chaos that would result if, during a crowded Speech Night, a disobedient student, thinking he was unobserved, lit a cigarette back-stage and thus set off the sprinkler system and drenched the audience. Compare this with the outcomes if a disgruntled student deliberately set fire to the administration block.

Each case has to be seen for what it is and judged on its own merits. If someone has done something stupid, it does not mean that there is a culture of contempt for the law in that situation; it means that someone needs to become more aware of the need for mature behaviour. This is why it is important to *see* just what is at stake. Don't rush into judgement, especially if you are one charged with the task of remedying the problem.

Make a calm judgement

Making calm judgements, of course, sounds much easier than it is. Granted that we are

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adults and should be able to rise above the emotional level, it is not always that simple. When you learn that one of your pupils has wreaked havoc on an expensive car, it is hard not to call for the re-introduction of capital punishment or at least transportation. However, rushing into action might be the worst thing that you can do – it might obscure certain information that might show the incident in a new light. Calm heads make the best decisions, and restoring a school's valuable reputation requires the best decisions. The need to *judge* correctly is paramount. Failure to do so might lead to far greater damage in the long term.

Change the situation

Let's assume that you have made the wisest possible decision, and now you are going to *act* on it. What happens next? The aim is to avoid repetitions of the behaviour, otherwise the threat to your school's reputation will remain. This is definitely the hardest step, because it is the one that requires future-oriented action.

If the incident is due to the misconduct of one or two students, the wrong-doers can be dealt with in various ways, including counselling, appropriate punishment (not forgetting restitution for the damage done), on-going support, or in some very special cases, exclusion. The last one might help your school as a whole, but will it really help the individual?

If, on the other hand, the problem is a systemic one, reflecting a general disregard for the standards that are seen as fundamental to a particular school, the follow-up action needs to be far more extensive.

Imagine that there is a widespread and ingrained contempt for the property rights of other people in the school. This will not be affected by the punishment of one or two students. It will require a more coherent response. As Shakespeare noted:

Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are relieved,
Or not at all.

(*Hamlet* Act 4 Scene 3 Verses 9-11)

Widespread attitudes such as contempt must be addressed in a holistic manner, involving all the stakeholders. It might seem useful to address those individuals who have committed the most recent offence, but in fact, they could well be the tip of the iceberg. Cutting pointy bits from ice-flows doesn't really impact on the ice-flow. To effect significant change, you need something more dramatic.

Faced with a major challenge, school authorities can make various decisions. They might opt to hide the truth, scape-goating a few individuals in the hope that their removal from the scene will restore people's faith in the institution. A second option is to sheet the blame home to some other group – an over-imaginative press, a slur campaign by a rival school, or even the failure of a small section of the parent body.

A third, and preferable option is to maturely accept the responsibility and pledge to change the situation. Anyone familiar with the story

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of Australian education could find examples of each response, and it is not surprising that only the third approach has lasting benefit.

We live in a competitive world

We know education is a competitive industry, and whatever we might think of the business model of schooling, it is hard to deny that parents feel they are the customers and they alone with make the decision about the education of their children. In making these decisions, they can be guided by many criteria, ranging from NAPLAN results to the condition of the buildings, from the image of the school in the community to the tuition costs. In this competitive environment, *image* is a significant factor, and to pretend otherwise is to deny the results of countless surveys by reputable academics. Of course, just what image means to different people is a complex issue, but most of us make a decision based on the overall impression that "this

school will be suitable for my child".

After dealing with a crisis, it is tempting to think we can change the long-term image of a school by tinkering with incidentals – tightening up the uniform policy, making sure the students keep their school clean, improving our contact with the local press – and these strategies might indeed be useful. However, if we really want to alter a school's image (or personality) in the community, we must change the reality, using Shakespeare's "desperate appliance".

If we have detected a general state of malaise in the school's attitudes – academic, spiritual, physical, cultural or social – we must be prepared to tackle these things at their roots. It is not enough to paper over the cracks if the building is falling down. We must instead be willing to leave our houses of straw or of wood and find a house of bricks, where we can regroup and prevent problems in the future. In that way, our reputation will be real, not illusory. Nobody suggests it will be easy, but who can deny that it will be worthwhile? ET

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